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DOCTOR WHO

RICHELLE MEAD

SOMETHING BORROWED

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About Richelle Mead

Richelle Mead is the bestselling author of the *Vampire Academy*, *Bloodlines* and *Age of X* series. Her love of fantasy and science-fiction began at an early age when her father read her Greek mythology

and her brothers made her watch *Flash Gordon*. She went on to study folklore and religion at the University of Michigan, and, when not writing, Richelle spends her time drinking lots of coffee,

keeping up with reality TV, and collecting 1980s T-shirts. Richelle lives with her family in Seattle in the USA.

Find out more about Richelle at www.richellemead.com

Books by Richelle Mead

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The Golden Lily

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Shadow Kiss

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Last Sacrifice

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Storm Born

Thorn Queen

Iron Crowned

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1

It was typical. The Doctor promised me champagne and cake, and instead I got flying lizards.

‘ *Pterodactylus antiquus*, to be precise,’ he told me, ducking as one of the creatures in question swooped low over his head. It was such a close call that the rush of air ruffled the springy curls of his hair. ‘Or perhaps *Pterodactylus extra-smallus* would be a better name, since I don’t recall them being quite so pocket-sized during my last Late Jurassic trip.’

That wasn’t how I would have described them, but maybe it depended on the size of your pockets.

These beasts were about as big as pigeons, and the only upside so far was that they seemed to be

leaving *us* alone. I couldn't say the same for the terrified pedestrians around us, though. We'd only arrived on Koturia minutes ago, leaving the TARDIS in a small alley tucked between two

obnoxiously coloured buildings on a busy street. We'd heard the screams as soon as we stepped out

of the door and had been met with pretty much the last scene that came to mind when I thought of

weddings. Bachelor parties? Perhaps. Weddings? Definitely not.

'Maybe they're babies,' I said, cringing against a hot-pink building decorated with silvery lattice-

work. I was trying to keep out of the way, both of the pterodactyls and of the panicked people

heedlessly shoving others aside in an effort to escape. The creatures were homing in specifically on the Koturians, attacking them with sharp claws and beaks that drew blood and tore skin with each

strike. Across the street, I saw several of the pterodactyls gang up on a woman and actually try to

carry her away. She was saved at the last moment when a hysterical man accidentally ran into her,

disrupting the attack.

'I don't think so.' The Doctor was annoyingly calm, oblivious to the frenzy around him as he

squinted up at the winged menaces. 'These are some kind of specially modified breed, nothing

natural. You can tell by that gold sheen on their wing membrane. No earthly pterodactyl had that.

Can't you see it?'

Mostly all I could see was that it would be very easy for those talons to turn on us at any moment.

Small lines of thought appeared on the Doctor's forehead. 'This isn't the first time I've seen

something like this,' he murmured.

He didn't elaborate, as per his way, and I wasn't really in the mood to play our usual game of

Twenty Questions. The fear around us was so all-consuming that it had an almost tangible quality, and the only thing I knew for sure was that we had to do something to end it. 'How do we stop them?' I

asked.

For a moment, I didn't think he'd heard me, but he finally dragged his gaze from the creatures and

did a quick, sharp assessment of the rest of our surroundings. His eyes travelled up the side of the pink and silver building, and he gave a decisive nod. 'There. You need to climb up to that sign.'

I looked. There, right on the edge of the roof, was a flashing sign that was brilliant even in the light of midday. Swirls of blue and green, a bit like a lava lamp, pulsed underneath its iridescent surface while dark-purple messages scrolled across it.

'That's two storeys up!' I exclaimed. 'And I'm in heels.'

'Well then, you should have worn more sensible shoes, shouldn't you? Really, Peri, don't blame

me for your oversights. The footholds are too small for me to do it myself. Now hurry!'

Some of the gaps in the lacy lattice-work looked too small for me too, but I knew he was right

about which of us was the best choice. The scream of a child drove me to action, and I kicked off my shoes without further hesitation. I grabbed hold of the metal scrollwork, grateful that it seemed firmly attached, and started to climb, though I winced when some of the sharp edges dug into my bare feet.

Moving upward also put me closer to some of the higher-flying pterodactyls, but I figured now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

'Hurry!' the Doctor yelled.

'I'm going as fast as I can!'

I scurried up. At one point, my foot missed its hold, and I slipped a few inches. I clung to the

lattice-work as tightly as I could, breathing deeply and steeling myself to regain my foothold and

continue the climb. Finally, agonisingly, I reached the roof and climbed over its edge, grateful to find a flat, solid surface to kneel on.

'Now what?' I called down.

I could barely hear the Doctor's answer above the noise of panic. 'Grab the corner of the screen

and rip it off!'

At first glance, I didn't think it was possible. Then I saw that each corner had a small steel loop

attached to it. I grabbed hold of one, then yelped, jerking away. The metal was so hot it had burned me. Below, I could hear the Doctor shouting encouragement, though his words were tinged with

urgency and impatience.

Inspiration hit me, and I grabbed hold of my skirt. It was made of two layers, a light chiffon over

heavier silk, and I ripped a large strip of the top layer away. I then tore it in half. The gauzy fabric wasn't the best protection, but wrapping it round my hands provided some relief from the heat as I

tried to pull the screen away again. Nothing happened. Refusing to accept failure, I gave it another tug and felt the slightest give. One more white-knuckled pull, and the screen slowly began to rip apart. As it did, I could see glittering wires and circuits sparking inside like a tiny Fourth of July show as fluorescent goop began trickling out of the bottom. I glanced down at the Doctor, waiting for my next instructions, when the most amazing thing happened.

In seconds, the mini-pterodactyls abruptly abandoned their prey and merged into an orderly flock.

Their displeasure was expressed in a cacophony of jarring caws as they soared up like one being and

flew out of sight. For a moment, an eerie silence hung in the street,

then at last the Koturians began to recover, glancing warily around as they helped each other up and tended to the injured. Deeming my

job done, I made my way back down the lattice-work and jumped the last couple of feet. The Doctor

was beaming.

‘Well done! That wasn’t so difficult, was it?’

I glanced down at the angry red marks on my hands. ‘Depends on your definition of difficult. What

happened?’

He pointed up at the dismantled sign. ‘Those lights use radiant Gengi tube technology. A bit gaudy,

if you ask me, but quite trendy in places like this.’

‘Well, you *are* the expert when it comes to gaudy,’ I said, giving a meaningful look to his red-and-yellow plaid coat and green tie.

He ignored the jibe. ‘When the tubes inside are damaged they emit a type of electromagnetic

radiation that you can’t perceive, but which is quite irritating to creatures like those.’

I remembered his earlier words. ‘Then you *have* seen them before.’

‘Not them specifically,’ he corrected. ‘But something with a similar feel. Let us hope it’s just a

coincidence.’

Now that I didn’t feel my life was in imminent danger I finally had the chance to look around and

truly take in the world we’d come to. The Doctor had already briefed me on the Koturians, and I

found them exactly as he’d described. On the surface they resembled humans – and Time Lords, for

that matter – save that their natural hair colour varied wildly. I saw ordinary brunettes like me and blonds like the Doctor, but the

majority sported colours I would've expected to find in punk rock

bands back home: deep purple, lime green, bright orange and so forth. Closer scrutiny showed me

they weren't the only species here. At least half of those on the streets were clearly aliens from other worlds, although, like the Doctor and me, they hadn't been targeted.

And then I noticed the city itself. My jaw dropped.

'This looks like –' I could barely utter the words, certain my eyes were playing tricks on me – 'Las Vegas.'

'Well, I should think so,' the Doctor said as we began to walk down the street, 'seeing as that's

what the Koturians modelled their civilisation on.'

Las Vegas was an easy weekend road trip from my college town of Pasadena. I'd only been there

once, but there was no mistaking the resemblance. Some of the buildings bore more than just a passing similarity to my memories. Sure, some of the details were different, but if you'd suddenly transported tourists here from the Strip in Las Vegas back on Earth, I doubt they'd have noticed. The same sort of over-the-top facades loomed above us, covered in lights that would no doubt ignite the evening's

darkness. As we walked I glimpsed gaming tables and slot machines through the glass doors.

Enterprising vendors took advantage of our reprieve and were already back on the streets waving

around flyers for tonight's entertainments.

'That's *exactly* like the Sahara,' I said, coming to a halt outside an impressive hotel and casino complex. 'I remember visiting it.'

The Doctor nodded. 'So did the Koturians. We're about, oh, two hundred years after your time.

Early Koturian explorers visited Earth in the late twentieth century and were charmed by the glitz and excitement of Las Vegas – as well as its money-making potential. They're quite the entrepreneurs, you

see. They quickly realised the allure of a city solely devoted to pleasure and games of chance – not just to humans but to many other species as well – so they took that concept and ran with it on a much, much grander scale.'

I shook my head, still feeling a little dazed. 'How strange.'

'Is it?' He gave me a sidelong look. 'Seems like a very American concept, really. Exploiting

people's hopes and dreams for profit. I figured you'd be quite comfortable with that.'

I rolled my eyes. 'That's a pretty harsh view of my countrymen.'

'Well, believe what you want, but the Koturians have made a lot of money from their business plan.

This is one of the wealthiest planets in the solar system. People come from far and wide to make their fortunes – and to consecrate their love.'

'Consecrate their … You mean get married? But Las Vegas weddings are tacky.'

The Doctor grinned. 'On the contrary, that's one of the ways the Koturians' version ended up

different from the original. This place is considered the height of romance. Anyone who's anyone

tries to have a wedding on Koturia, and, as you'll soon see, the Koturians themselves have an

especial interest in marriage.'

2

The Doctor took me to a building near the edge of the downtown area, and at first I thought it must be another hotel, based on its size and design. But when I noticed that there wasn't the usual buzz of

tourist activity, I realised with a start that this was a private residence. The sprawling building took up several city blocks and had five floors, and the glass in the arched windows along the front had

undergone some special treatment to make it sparkle in a rainbow of

colours. It even had flying

buttresses, though their silvery-blue surfaces were a far cry from any medieval church.

‘How many people live here?’ I exclaimed. ‘There must be more than just your friend and his

family.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Not as far as I know. Well, aside from the servants.’

One of those servants, dressed in a sunny yellow uniform, showed us into a vaulted foyer. We gave

our names, and moments later an older man with receding lavender hair came scurrying in. His face

was alight with joy.

‘Doctor! Is it really you? You’ve changed … Not that we aren’t used to that sort of thing around

here.’

He must’ve seen the Doctor before this most recent regeneration.

The Doctor shook the man’s hand vigorously. ‘Yes, yes. A little different round the edges since our

last meeting on Kiri 4, but all the charm and intellect are still here.’

‘And the modesty,’ I added.

The man turned towards me, and the Doctor seemed to remember I was there. ‘Ah, yes. Evris, may

I present Miss Peri Brown of Earth. Peri, this is Lord Evris Makshi. We were once both caught up in

a minor incident involving some very disagreeable robots.’

Evris chuckled. ‘Incident? Is that what you call saving my life? However you want to spin it, I’m

just honoured that you came to attend my son’s wedding. And you

too, Miss Brown.'

There was a shrewd glint in the Doctor's eyes. 'And what about the adorably terrifying

pterodactyls we encountered on our way in? Are they on the guest list too?'

The cheery look on Evris's face vanished. 'Ah. Them. I'd heard there was another attack today.'

'Another?' asked the Doctor. I was reminded of a hunting hound sniffing the wind.

Evris nodded. 'Those creatures have been plaguing us for a few months now. It started off as just a

nuisance. They'd appear briefly on the Swathe and –'

'Swathe?' I interrupted.

'The city's main tourist district,' he explained. 'We call it that because it's a swathe of commerce and delight.'

'But not a strip.' I tried to keep a straight face.

'No. Much more expansive.' Evris cleared his throat. 'Anyway, they used to content themselves

with mild attacks: a few swipes, a little blood here and there. Then, in the last two weeks, it's

suddenly increased. We see them nearly every day, and their assaults are more vicious. They've even

started carrying away victims – never to be seen again.'

'How awful,' I said, recalling how I'd nearly witnessed that very thing.

The Doctor nodded in agreement. 'Hardly a favourable time for a wedding.'

'I concur.' Evris's face fell even more. 'Tourism's taken a downward turn, and half our citizens

won't even go outside. If Jonos wasn't so near the end of his Phasing, we'd call the whole thing off.

But none of us knows how long he has, and so we're going forward with it tonight. After that … well.

Then we hope to do something about this little problem.'

I didn't really think flying reptiles that attacked and kidnapped people qualified as a 'little'

problem, but I was too interested in his earlier word choice. 'Phasing?' I asked. 'What's that?'

The Doctor shone with his usual delight for anything curious and fascinating. 'It's what I meant

earlier about Koturians having an especial interest in weddings. During their marriage ceremony, they transform and take on a new appearance. Several factors, internal and external, kick their metabolism into overdrive – for lack of a more technical explanation.'

Evris was nodding along. 'It's a very sacred thing for our people. The beloved is the first one to

see the new face as they begin their lives together. It also marks an important rite of passage in

general, a brilliant experience that all Koturians should go through.' His brief enthusiasm turned to dismay. 'However, we're only capable of it once, during a very short window in the prime of our

lives. Then the chance is gone forever.'

It was hard to wrap my mind round such a concept – though certainly not as hard as it would've

been before I began travelling with the Doctor. 'And your son has nearly passed his?'

'Yes. In fact, we'd given up. He's a good boy – but has his fair share of quirks. Those sorts of

individuals can be quite challenging, you know.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I certainly do know.'

The Doctor cut me a look. 'Well, well, aren't you on a roll today?'

Evris, oblivious to our exchange, shook his head in a mix of both

amusement and exasperation as

he continued about his son. ‘I suppose we shouldn’t have been surprised when he chose an alien

bride. It’s exactly the kind of contrary thing he’d do.’

The Doctor had been listening with an indulgent expression, but at those words everything about

him suddenly went on alert. ‘Alien?’

‘Humanoid,’ Evris said quickly. ‘No tentacles or sentient piles of slime. Of course, we were

desperate enough that we might have very well accepted that.’ He chuckled at his own joke. ‘And,

really, she’s a lovely woman. Cultured and intelligent. Jonos is quite smitten with her.’

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ said the Doctor, more to himself than us.

I frowned. ‘But if she’s alien … can he still transform? Go through the Phasing?’

‘Certainly,’ said Evris. ‘I mean, she can’t, of course. It’s not in her physiology. But for us it’s the chemicals and neurotransmitters involved in love and bonding with another person that serve as the

catalyst. Those will be the same for Jonos, regardless of his object of affection.’

I could tell that the Doctor still had some puzzle on his mind, though he was keeping it to himself

for now. ‘Well. Between the upcoming wedding and unwelcome flying visitors, you’ve certainly been

kept busy. I’d love to hear more about it. And I’d also love to hear more about your future daughter-in-law. In fact, I don’t suppose I could meet her?’

Evris looked surprised. ‘Not before tonight’s festivities, I’m afraid. She’s deeply involved with

preparations. Besides, she’s off in the women’s section of the house,

inaccessible to the likes of us.

But I find myself with a bit of time right now, if you'd like to have an early dinner?'

'That sounds wonderful,' I said.

'No, no, not in your state, Peri.' The Doctor's look of chastisement was wholly unexpected.

'My state?' I asked.

He gestured to my skirt. 'Look what you've done in your carelessness. You can't go to a civilised

event like that. Evris, I don't suppose your people could make her look respectable?'

'Carelessness! Respectable!' It was the best response I could splutter out.

'Easily,' said Evris. He moved over to a table at the side of the room and pushed a few buttons on

a console.

Within seconds, a young woman scurried in, wearing one of the yellow servants' uniforms. A

matching veil covered much of her head, but I could see that her pale blonde hair, streaked with blue, was pulled back into a neat bun. She bowed low to Evris and kept her eyes averted.

'Yes, my lord?'

'Please take Miss Brown and help her with whatever she needs to prepare for the wedding. The

Doctor and I will be in the green dining room.'

'How many dining rooms are there exactly?' I asked.

The Doctor waved me off. 'Sounds like you're in good hands. Go enjoy yourself, and who knows?

Perhaps you'll get a glimpse of the lucky bride.'

His face still wore that sunny, flippant expression that could win others over, but I saw a knowing

glint in his eyes. I understood what he wanted me to do perfectly, even if I didn't know his

motivations.

'Perhaps,' I agreed.

He and Evris strolled off without another word, and I turned towards the patiently waiting serving-

girl. 'Shall we go, miss?' she asked.

3

The serving-girl began leading me through the house, where I instantly became lost. The many

corridors were like a labyrinth, connecting with each other in a way I couldn't follow. Everything

was as vast as the entrance hall had been, with high ceilings and windows, decorated with art in that bright colour scheme Koturians apparently loved. It was still amazing to me that only one family lived here and that there were four more floors like this.

'Are you married?' I asked, still fascinated by the process. 'Have you gone through the, uh,

Phasing? Oh, and I didn't catch your name.'

'Wira, miss. And, no, I haven't had that honour.' She sighed. 'And sometimes I don't know if I ever

will.'

'But you must have time, right?' Wira seemed young to me, but I didn't know how long the

Koturian window lasted. 'Or are you like Jonos?'

'No, I have time.' She brightened, but there was a wistful look to her at the same time. 'I'm so glad he's going to be able to do it. I wonder what he'll look like afterwards.'

‘Is the new appearance random?’ I asked, thinking of Time Lord regenerations. ‘Or is there a

pattern?’

‘You have some control over it,’ she explained. ‘Your will and the strength of your love. And the

Imori stone.’

‘The what?’

‘They’re sacred stones found on our world. The bride and groom rest their hands on one during the

ceremony, and its divine power amplifies their love in order to complete the transformation.’

I pondered this, wondering how much ‘divine power’ truly played a role. If I knew the Doctor,

he’d probably have a more scientific explanation.

Wira’s expression grew dreamy as she gestured me to a stairwell. ‘I have a hard time imagining

Jonos changing, though. He’s already so handsome. How could he get any better?’

I couldn’t help a smile. ‘Sounds like you wouldn’t mind being his bride.’

Even under the veil, I could see her flush. ‘Oh no. I couldn’t. Not someone like me. He wouldn’t

give me a second thought.’

‘Someone kind and pretty? Seems like you could get a third and fourth thought.’ Her blush

deepened.

We finally reached a set of double doors that opened up to an enormous suite with floor-to-ceiling

windows overlooking the city. A giant marble tub sat off to one side.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Wira. She touched a small panel on the tub’s edge, and jets in the bottom of the basin began spraying water into it. ‘He’d never be interested in me. He’s so clever and

wonderful. It’s why it took him so long to find someone suitable. Lania – she’s a real lady. She may be from another planet, but she’s obviously high-bred and sophisticated.’

‘Lania’s his fiancée?’

‘Yes.’ Wira touched another part of the panel, and cleverly placed lights in all colours turned on in the tub, lighting it up in a rainbow display. Nothing plain for these Koturians. ‘She’s a brilliant

woman. So clever. So cultured. It’s no wonder Jonos fell for someone like her.’ Wira’s unspoken

thought, I realised, was that he couldn’t fall for someone like *her*.

She seemed so forlorn about her unrequited love that I didn’t ask anything more about the wedding.

I felt a little silly going through so much primping for an event where I didn’t even know the couple, but Wira clearly did this on a regular basis and was brisk and efficient about her work. It seemed to distract her from her earlier woes, and she began to grow enthusiastic as she described other facets of Koturian life to me. I soon became absorbed as well, still amazed at a civilisation that had modelled itself on one of the most notorious cities on Earth.

It only took her about an hour to make me into an acceptable wedding guest, and I stared at myself

in the mirror with amazement, hardly able to believe what she’d achieved in so little time. My hair

was done up in elaborate braids, and the make-up, though extreme by Earth standards, was in line

with what I’d seen among the Koturian women on the streets. It was as much art as ornamentation,

with fanciful flowers and swirls along my cheeks and at the corners of my eyes, all in greens that

matched the long dress I wore. It seemed a shame when she offered

me a veil like she wore.

‘Do I have to?’ I asked.

Wira shrugged. ‘It goes with the dress, but it’s not required. There’ll be plenty of off-worlders

without them.’

Her words reminded me of the main reason for this spa day, and I wondered how exactly I was

supposed to act on the Doctor’s unspoken suggestion to find the bride. ‘What about Lania? Does she

follow your customs?’

‘Oh yes. She’s taken to them quite readily … though she still follows many of her own ways. She

has her own servants and keeps her wing very private.’

I mulled over Wira’s words as she led me back through the maze of corridors. When we reached

the ground floor, I noticed a stairwell leading down. I came to a halt. ‘There are levels *underground* too?’

‘Two of them,’ Wira confirmed. ‘Those are the levels Lania lives in.’

‘Oh?’ I took a few steps towards the doorway. ‘Could I take a look around?’

‘Oh no! I told you, privacy is very important to her. None of us dares to –’ The girl gasped as a

group of people suddenly came round a corner, making their way to the lower stairwell. ‘It’s her!

Come on.’ Wira grabbed my arm and jerked me over to the side of the hall. She bowed her head,

lowering her eyes to the ground in deference.

I had no such obligation and, besides, my curiosity got the better of me. I was dying to see this

woman who'd so captivated a Koturian nobleman that he'd been willing to use up his one shot at

transformation on her. At first, I couldn't make out anything because of her entourage. Four flanked her on each side, and it was difficult to tell if they were male or female. They were, however, most definitely *not* Koturians. They had distinctly reptilian features, with jutting jaws, flat noses and goldish-black scales along their skin. I admit, it wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind when Evris had said his son's fiancée was humanoid. I supposed love really was blind.

Then a glimpse of her hand told me she wasn't reptilian like her attendants. It could've been a

mirror of mine, and I wished I could get a better look at her face. She wore that fashionable Koturian veil, however, only giving me a quick glimpse of bluish eyes that swept past us in an imperious,

dismissive way. Her dress was similar to mine, long and voluminous, though embellished with blue

and silver. She'd nearly passed us when she came to an abrupt stop and did a double take. Her eyes

widened.

'You!' she spat.

4

At first, I was too stunned to react. There was something familiar about this woman, but I couldn't

place it.

'If you're here … so is *he*.' The green eyes glared at me through a gap in the veil that was almost completely hiding her face. 'Take her! Hurry.' Her eyes then fell on Wira, who was cringing and

trying to make herself as small as possible. 'And the other one too, I suppose.'

I finally had the sense to shout for help, but by that point there was a scaly hand clamped over my

mouth and a strong arm dragging me down the stairs. I thrashed against my captor, kicking backwards

as hard as I could. It gave me only a heartbeat of freedom, before another of Lania's minions came

and assisted him. I still wasn't really sure of their gender, but my brain had begun categorising them all as male.

They dragged Wira and me down two floors, through another twisting maze and eventually to a

room blocked by heavy double doors. We were pushed inside and Lania strode in after us, giving a

cursory look around. She pointed towards a smooth metal disc on the floor. 'There.'

The lizard-men threw us on to the disc without ceremony. Almost instantly a shimmering cone of

golden light appeared around us. Gingerly, I reached out to touch it, finding a seemingly solid surface

– one that suddenly tightened by a few inches. I shrank back towards Wira, who was trembling and

clinging to me in return.

I would've expected Lania's rooms to display that same luxury and comfort I'd seen upstairs. What

I saw instead was a makeshift lab, filled with tables and computers. Lania had hunched herself over

one of the latter and glanced up briefly at us before returning to whatever it was that held her interest.

'It's a sizian force field,' she said without emotion. 'Each time you touch it, it'll close in further until it finally suffocates you.' She paused for effect. 'So I wouldn't touch it if I were you.'

I still couldn't truly study her, especially leaning over. That sense of familiarity continued to nag at me, and her voice only furthered it. Who was she? Somehow I knew her, and she obviously knew me

– and the Doctor.

'Ah. Here's the house's entry log. He arrived two hours ago. No telling what damage he may have

done in that time.' She abruptly straightened up and fixed her eyes on me. 'Where is he now?'

'Who?' I asked.

'You know who!' She turned to one of her minions. 'There's no time to take these two to my

TARDIS. The field will contain them, but you'll have to stay here while the others are out searching for him. It's absolutely imperative we find him before the wedding. He could ruin everything. As it is, I can't imagine how he found out about this. But then nothing about him surprises me any more.'

'He's just a guest,' I blurted out.

That cold gaze swept over me again. 'Has he regenerated? Or is he still in that same outlandish

form?'

TARDIS. Regeneration. And, just like that, all my memories unlocked.

'The Rani,' I gasped out.

As those hard eyes narrowed at her name, it seemed impossible I hadn't recognised her right away.

From her frown, she apparently thought she should have been obvious to me as well. Understanding

hit her.

'Ah, yes. This.' She unwrapped the veil from round her head and shook out her light brown hair.

Her face was exactly the same as before, lovely in a hard, cold way. 'Stupid custom. I'll be glad to be rid of it.' The tight smile she gave me didn't reach her eyes. 'Too bad for you that you didn't

follow it. I might not have recognised you if you'd had one on.' She counted off four of her minions and gestured to the door. 'Go and find him. He's probably with Evris, so be discreet in getting him

away. We can't make a scene until this charade is over.'

'What are you doing here?' I demanded. 'Are you … are you in love

with Jonos?' It seemed

impossible, especially considering her history of ruthlessness and cold-hearted scientific schemes,

but why else would she be engaged to a Koturian?

'Love? That contrived, chemically driven state of idiocy?' The Rani rolled her eyes. 'Honestly,

you're as stupid and silly as the last time we met. I've never understood why the Doctor travels with your kind. It'd drive me mad … but then it's not like he's the model of sanity anyway.'

'He'll stop you,' I said, out of both defiance and obligation. 'Whatever you're doing, he won't let

you get away with it.'

'By the time he realises what's happened, he'll be too late.' She beckoned to two more of the

lizard-men. 'Let's go. Those fools will be expecting me for the women's preparation ritual or

whatever nonsense they have in mind.'

She entered something else into her computer and then re-wrapped the veil round her head. Her

two chosen attendants immediately closed ranks. 'I'll be back as soon as I can,' she snapped to those who remained. There were only two now, but I noticed they'd acquired some sort of guns since

entering the room.

The Rani swept out of the double doors, which slammed together with a thud, leaving us alone with

the guards.

5

I immediately began trying to think of a way to escape. I looked up and around, certain there must be a way to break the force field. It had emerged from the floor, and I wondered if that held the solution.

Unfortunately, when I tried to touch it, I accidentally bumped into the wall of light – making it close in more tightly. Wira whimpered.

'I don't understand what we've done to displease her,' she said in a small voice. 'Why would

Lania do something like this?'

'Because she's been deceiving you,' I explained. 'Her name isn't Lania. She's the Rani. A Time

Lord like the Doctor. Er, well, Time Lady.'

She was certainly no one I'd ever expected to see again. Our last encounter had been on Earth,

during a trip to the Industrial Revolution, when she'd been trying to extract a sleep-inducing chemical from innocent humans caught up in the chaos of the time. I remembered that part pretty well because

she'd tried to do it to me too.

'She's a scientist.' That was an understatement, but I didn't quite know how to articulate to Wira

the full extent of the Rani's obsession. To the Rani, science trumped all other things in life.

Sometimes she had specific, selfish goals. Other times, she'd get caught up in the experiments

themselves: science for the sake of science. Her experiments were what had got her exiled from

Gallifrey, and that single-minded focus on her research had replaced any morality she might have had

– and certainly any regard for life forms she considered beneath her.

'We have to warn the Doctor,' I told Wira. The girl was so frightened, I wasn't even sure if she

heard me. 'He's the only one who can –'

A clatter of metal was the sole warning I had before a hole in the ceiling suddenly opened, and the

Doctor came tumbling down to the floor, landing in an ungraceful heap of rainbow plaid.

Nonetheless, he rose to his feet with all the dignity of an Olympic gymnast who'd just landed a

perfect somersault.

'Please go on,' he told me cheerfully. 'The only one who can … what? Awe the masses with his

wit and charm? Stump the most revered intellects of your time – or any time?'

'The only one about to get shot!' I yelled. 'Look out!'

The two reptilian men that the Rani had left on guard were charging forward, brandishing their

guns. The Doctor ducked as one of them fired, emitting a blue burst of light that instead hit the force field surrounding Wira and me. The ray bounced off our prison wall, back at the lizard-man who'd

fired it. He keeled over backwards, hitting the floor with a thud. Wira jumped in alarm, hitting the wall of light and triggering another restriction in our space. I gripped her hard and pulled her closer to me, scarcely daring to breathe at how near the walls were now.

The remaining creature advanced menacingly on the Doctor, who was searching around frantically

for help. Then he spied a metal ceiling panel that had fallen down with him. He picked it up and

swung it with astonishing force, missing, but effectively dodging an attack. His second attempt struck the reptilian man in the head, and he crumpled to the ground. The Doctor clung to his makeshift

weapon and paused, waiting for movement from his fallen foes. When nothing happened, he knelt

down and studied the one he'd hit.

'He'll be out for a while.' The Doctor looked over at the one who'd been hit by the ricocheting gun

blast. His face fell and, to my surprise, he touched the creature's

cheek. ‘The gun was on its highest level. Shame. I always feel so guilty killing the Rani’s engineered lackeys. They’re already in a sorry state. They never have a fighting chance to begin with.’

‘They seemed to have a fighting chance when they abducted us,’ I countered. ‘And when that one

nearly shot you. You got lucky.’

The Doctor picked up the guns and carefully placed them on a counter. He wiped his hands

together, as though they were dirty. For a fleeting moment, I saw true regret in his eyes, and then he was back to his usual self. ‘Skill, my dear. Not luck.’

‘Well, why don’t you use some of your skill to get us out of –’ I bit my words off as I replayed his comments about engineered lackeys in my mind. ‘You know the Rani’s here.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. I’d suspected when I sent you to investigate – which I see you did with your

usual thoroughness. Listening to Evris’s stories simply confirmed it, and I got away as quickly as I could to find a quiet way to come in and take a look. Air tunnels aren’t my favourite way to travel, but they work.’ He strolled around the room, clucking his tongue at what he saw. ‘My, my, she has been

busy.’

‘Do you think you could –’

‘– do this?’ He pushed a button, and the force field vanished. I sagged in relief, feeling as though I’d suddenly emerged from being underwater.

‘Yes, thank you.’ I gave Wira a quick check, but mostly she seemed scared, with no signs of

physical damage. Wrapping her arms round herself, she sat down against a nearby wall and looked

about her in disbelief. I gave her a small pat on the shoulder before turning my full attention to the Doctor. ‘How did you know about the Rani?’

‘From her little winged calling cards. I’ve seen some of her creations before, both the kind she

breeds, like the ones we encountered outside, and the ones she manipulates – like those poor saps on the floor. That gold sheen is a side-effect of the process.’ He paused to push a few buttons and read what came up on a display. ‘Anyway, I could’ve written that off as a coincidence until I started

hearing all that talk about Jonos’s “brilliant and cultured” alien bride. Those certainly aren’t the words *I’d* use to describe her, but she is a scientific genius … so I suppose convincing others that she’s pleasant might be only a little harder than genetically modifying reptiles.’

‘But why is she doing it?’ I asked. I stood by him as he scrolled through information on a computer, but most of it made no sense to me. ‘What in the world do pterodactyls have to do with tricking

someone into marrying you?’

‘Tricking?’ asked Wira. She lifted her head up from where it had rested on her knees. ‘What do

you mean?’

That earlier love I’d sensed in her shone through her eyes, and it broke my heart. ‘It’s like I told you before,’ I said gently, ‘Lania’s not who she seems. She’s misled all of you as part of some plot to get Jonos to marry her.’

‘But why does she need to trick anyone?’ asked Wira. ‘Jonos already loves her.’

‘What Peri is being too delicate to say is that she – the Rani – isn’t in love with poor Jonos. Or

should I say lucky Jonos.’ The Doctor shuddered. ‘Can you even imagine a lifetime shackled to that

woman? He’s really dodged a bullet, assuming we can get to the church on time to save him from

some untimely demise. Tell me, what do you make of this?’

It took me a moment to follow the topic change and drag my gaze from the stricken Wira. I leaned

closer to the Doctor and tried to understand what he was showing me. ‘You could have been a little

more tactful with her,’ I whispered.

‘I told her the truth.’ The Doctor made no attempt to regulate his volume.

‘We don’t know that he’s going to meet an untimely demise.’

‘No, but most likely. Remember who we’re dealing with.’ The Doctor was still playing flippant,

but I again caught a ghostly hint of worry in his eyes. ‘Now, look at what we have here. A mess of

biological data – and I do mean mess. There’s no order to it, just a jumble of entries, genetic records.

The only thing I can tell for certain is that it’s all Koturian.’

‘But if she doesn’t love him, why would she marry him?’ moaned Wira.

The Doctor gave her a brief, irritated look before returning to the data. ‘Probably something to do

with his Phasing, if I had to guess. Although, guessing the Rani’s thoughts … Well, that’s something few have ever had success at. It’s amazing that she was able to collect so much data without anyone

noticing.’

I stared at the screen without really seeing it. ‘Because she didn’t collect it herself. The

pterodactyls did. They took skin and blood from their victims and brought it back to her. And they

took some of the actual victims too.’

An eager gleam filled the Doctor’s eyes. ‘So help me, Peri, you might be on to something. None of

the Koturians thought to connect the attacks to Jonos’s fiancée. Why would they? Most people expect

the claws to come out *after* marriage. Creative choice of data collection, I'll give her that.'

'Is it?' I asked wryly. 'When we last left her, you trapped her in her TARDIS with a *T. rex*. Maybe she found a way to pass the time.'

'Did I?' He arched an eyebrow. 'Yes, I suppose I did. Well, never let it be said the Rani can't

make lemonade out of lemons. Or efficient biogenetically engineered research tools out of a

frightening prehistoric encounter.' Straightening up, he began pacing the room. 'The Rani isn't the

type to collect that information without a reason. There's a purpose; we just need to find it. She's deposited the raw data here. But her actual work … that'll be somewhere else. Here, help me.'

He began running his hands over every smooth surface on the consoles and counters he could find. I

immediately followed suit, not knowing what I should be looking for until, a few minutes later, my

fingers ran over an almost imperceptible bump in an otherwise flat surface. 'Doctor?'

Excitement filled his eyes as he walked over and saw what I was pointing to. When he ran his hand

over it in a circular motion, a square indentation appeared in the metal. He tapped the surface, and it slid open, revealing a small compartment.

'And here we are.' Triumphant, he lifted a small tetragonal crystal. 'The Rani, while unpredictable

in many ways, is also predictable in others. She's set this lab up like the one in her TARDIS, and

she's too paranoid to leave data on anything she can't easily take with her. This is going to have our answers.' He strode over to another computer and inserted the crystal into a slot I hadn't noticed.

Another loud sigh came from Wira. 'Poor Jonos.'

The Doctor grimaced at the interruption to his brilliant reveal, but mercifully left the girl alone. ‘As suspected,’ he said. ‘Here’s where the order is. She’s got their genetic information organised by age and gender, as well as how far along they were in their Phasing windows.’

‘So you know what she’s doing?’ I asked.

‘Not a clue,’ he admitted. ‘But it doesn’t matter. It’s safe to assume she’s up to no good, so we’ll stop her now and ask questions later. If she took you, she knows I’m here.’

I nodded. ‘She doesn’t know what you look like, though. She asked if you’d regenerated since the

last time we saw her – she’s not a fan of this appearance, you know.’

He chuckled. ‘Yes, she’s made that very clear before. You think she’d be kinder about it, though,

seeing as she knows as well as I there’s not much we can do about it. Besides, I think it’s clear that I just keep improving.’ Studying his reflection in a monitor, he gave a decisive nod.

‘It’s so sad,’ said Wira. I wasn’t even sure if she was talking to us at this point. ‘Jonos will be

wasting his one chance at Phasing on a woman who doesn’t love him.’

That seemed to finally make the Doctor snap. ‘Honestly, are you going to keep –’ He froze in

shock, and I took a few steps towards him.

‘What is it?’

‘That. This.’ He held up the crystal he’d taken from the console. ‘That’s why the Rani’s studying

the Koturians. She’s trying to affect Time Lord regeneration somehow. She must suspect – or perhaps

she’s found – a connection between our respective transformations.’

‘Is there one?’ I asked, startled. ‘They’re completely different processes. Theirs comes from love.

Yours from death.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘But both result in a complete transformation of the body. And if anyone can find

connections between things that have no business being linked together –’ he paused and gave the

lizard-men a meaningful look – ‘then it’s her. Come on, we have to stop that wedding.’

Without waiting to see if I, or Wira, was coming, he hurried to the double doors and pulled on one

of the handles. There was a bright flash of light, and he jumped back with a cry of surprise.

‘We just can’t get a break today,’ I said, running over to him.

‘The Rani apparently didn’t want to take any chances,’ he said, scowling at his hand. ‘It’s a credit to you, really, that she thought you’d escape both the sizian field and her minions.’

‘She didn’t *seem* to give me much credit,’ I said. ‘She kept saying I was stupid and silly.’

‘Don’t let her get to you,’ said the Doctor, kneeling down to study the door. ‘You’re not stupid in

the least.’

‘Can we climb out through the ceiling?’ Wira asked.

I turned and was surprised to see her beside me. She’d wiped away her tears and a determined

expression gleamed in her eyes. The Doctor gave her an appraising look.

‘Well, you’ve already undergone a transformation of your own, haven’t you?’ he said.

She held her head up higher. ‘If we can stop Lania from taking advantage of Jonos, then I want to

help. Just tell me what I need to do,’ she said fiercely.

I could see a smile start to curve at the Doctor’s lips and then he put on a stern mask. ‘Right, then.

We could go through the ceiling, but it'd take longer … and be a lot more uncomfortable. No, ladies, we simply have to blow this door up.'

'Blowing something up is simple?' I asked.

'Simple, yes. Easy, no.' He peered around the lab. 'Too bad she didn't leave any explosives or

fuel lying about.'

I pointed. 'What about the guards' guns?'

'Unfortunately, their deadliness comes more from a signal to disrupt biological functioning than any sort of brute-force destruction.'

'But they must have a battery or fuel source, right?' I insisted. 'Is there some way we could ignite it?'

The Doctor retrieved one of the guns and dismantled it, revealing a silvery rectangular object. He

held it up to the light. 'Yes and yes. Go get the other one.'

I hurried to comply. Meanwhile, he knelt down in front of the doors and carefully set the battery in front of them, pressed right up to where they met. He laid another object on top of it and then placed the second battery on top of that. I tilted my head to get a better look.

'Is that your sonic lance?'

'Yes.'

He turned it on, sprang up and grabbed my hand. We reached the far side of the lab just as the

batteries exploded and took out a good chunk of the doors' lower halves. He returned and gripped

hold of the new openings. The doors gave easily.

'Your lance is in pieces,' I pointed out, kicking a fragment with my toe.

'I have a spare, and I'll be careful not to blow it up. Now, come. We have no time to lose.' He

turned to Wira who was scurrying over to join us. 'You can take us to

the wedding?'

She still had that fierce air about her and pointed upwards through the house's labyrinth. 'Yes,' she said. 'It's being held in the chapel over at the Flamingo.' And she sped away.

6

We followed Wira through the twisting corridors and up the stairs to the grand entrance hall.

'The Flamingo? That's another Vegas place,' I observed, hurrying to keep up with the newly

motivated Wira. I could see the Doctor was having the same trouble.

'It's the most exclusive place on the Swathe,' Wira said as she reached the massive front door.

'Their chapel has the largest Imori stone ever found on our planet. Only elite families are allowed to use it.'

'No doubt part of the Rani's motivation in choosing her paramour,' the Doctor muttered. 'Go big or

go home.'

'Wira said the stones are divine. But I'm guessing not?'

'No,' he told me. 'They're an elemental combination found only on this planet. A similar one is

found on Azzarozia, which they use as rocket fuel. Here, the Imori stones help provide energy to

power the accelerated metabolism needed during the Koturian transformations. I'm sure the Rani's

obtained some samples for her research as well, but probably with less bloodshed – unless she

decided to biologically manipulate a drill.' He seemed pretty pleased with his joke, but my next

question dimmed his enthusiasm.

'What about the victims who were taken whole? Some may still be

alive.'

'I know,' he said grimly. 'And my guess is they won't be once she's decided to wrap up her

research.'

Wira led us back to the crowded Swathe, and all of us were running by now, driven by the urgency

of our task. Evening had fallen, and all the buildings had come to life with dazzling displays of light.

We found the Flamingo and entered through its main door, cutting across a casino full of sequin-clad gamers and servers who glared at us when we had to push them aside. The layout was nearly as

confusing as Evris's house.

I was gasping by the time we reached the white marble doorway leading to the chapel. Leaning

over, resting my hands on my knees, I discovered I'd torn this dress too. The Doctor came to a halt

beside me, panting as well.

'Looks like we may have to do more conditioning when we're back in the TARDIS,' he observed.

'More?' I asked. 'As opposed to what we do now?'

Two servants in Evris's yellow livery stood guard at the door. They seemed simply ceremonial,

with no weapons, probably because no one expected a deadly villainess to show up at a wedding, let

alone be a major player in it.

'I'm sorry,' one of them was saying to Wira, 'but we can't let you in – not when it's already

started.'

'This is important!' she exclaimed. 'Jonos is in danger.'

The two exchanged uncertain glances, but the Doctor had no patience for anything more. He simply

strode up to the doors and pushed them open. With an apologetic look at the servants, I quickly

followed him and sensed Wira right behind me. I didn't really know what we'd be walking into and

had a horrifying fear of everyone turning to stare.

They didn't because no one even noticed us. The 'chapel' was so huge and so vast that our entrance

took no attention away from the drama unfolding up at the front. The room actually looked remarkably like a cathedral from back home, with pews and stained-glass windows, save that it was all done in

more of those cringe-worthy colour schemes. Up where an altar would have been sat enormous urns

of flowers, towering over those gathered below. A glittering purple rock that I assumed was the Imori stone stood between them, about the size of a kitchen table. Waiting on each side of it, their profiles to the audience, were Jonos and the Rani. He had lavender hair like his father and was as handsome

as Wira had said. Some sort of officiant – dressed astonishingly like Elvis Presley – raised his arms in the air, and I just barely heard the word, 'Commence.' At the same moment, Jonos and the Rani

reached for each other and held hands over the stone. I didn't entirely know what was happening, but Wira did, and she rushed forward.

'No!'

But it was too late. A piercing yellow light began to shine from where the couple's hands were

clasped. It grew and grew until it spread over the rest of the rock and over them. Soon, the entire front half of the chapel was too blinding to look at, and I put a hand over my eyes. It lasted for almost thirty seconds, and then steadily the light faded. I still couldn't see right away, not after all that radiance, and I had to blink black spots away. When I finally focused on the couple again, I wondered if my

vision had been harmed.

Because Jonos looked the same.

The gasps and startled reactions of the couple and the congregation soon showed me that I wasn't

the only one who'd noticed the lack of transformation. Wira, bold before, had retreated back to us.

Her eyes were wide, her face pale.

'It's impossible,' she whispered.

'What is this?' demanded the Rani, her angry words echoing. 'Why didn't you change?'

Jonos, looking as stricken as everyone else, examined his hands and then touched his face. 'I … I

don't know. The stone came to life. I felt it. I felt the reaction begin in me, but then … it just didn't work.'

'The fault isn't in you. It's in your blushing bride,' announced the Doctor, striding forward. His

voice rang through the vaulted room.

Evris stood up in the front row. 'Doctor! What are you doing?'

The Rani's face twisted into a sneer as she removed her veil. 'Of course. Of course you're behind

this.'

The Doctor came to a halt and casually stuffed his hands in his pockets. 'No, actually. This was all you, I'm afraid. Lovely dress, by the way. I like the blue trim. Do you have something new and

something borrowed tucked away as well? It goes without saying that you yourself have the

"something old" more than taken care of.'

'They said this would work without two Koturians!' cried the Rani. She levelled glares at

everyone, including her groom. ‘You all said it would. You said he’d transform even if he wasn’t

marrying a Koturian.’

‘It’s true that your body doesn’t matter for his transformation.’ The Doctor looked like he was on

top of the world, probably because he loved both an audience and one-upping the Rani. ‘But your

heart does. Your figurative one, that is. Not your physical ones. The chemicals that churn through the body of someone in love are what the stone responds to, what spins up its energy cycle. But it needs two sets to drive it – and, alas, there’s only one person in love in this relationship. Only one person even capable of emotion, really. Considering the number of lacklustre marriages in the world, I’m

guessing the stone has a pretty low bar for *some* type of regard, but you couldn’t even get that high, Rani.’

Jonos looked between his bride and the Doctor in obvious confusion. ‘My darling Lania … what is

this about?’

‘Her name’s not Lania,’ said the Doctor. ‘And “darling” probably isn’t the best adjective. She’s

Gallifreyan like me and hoped to take advantage of your Phasing for her own devices. What was it,

Rani? Couldn’t glean enough from your prehistoric research team’s random sampling? Did you need

someone who’d specifically transformed because of you and whose DNA would therefore reflect

your influence?’

The Rani pointed accusingly at him. ‘Don’t act like it’s such a ridiculous idea, Doctor. You can’t

tell me you haven’t wanted more control over the regeneration process. Most Time Lords are at the

mercy of fate after death. But imagine if we could definitively control

the outcome! These people are the best lead I've found. They not only control their transformations but also improve in mind and

body. Surely you'd be interested in that?'

'Is that another slight on my appearance?' He gave a melodramatic sigh. 'Fate's been very good to

me, thank you very much, and I'm quite content with that. Maybe we don't have the control that they

do, but we're gifted with life many more times than others are.'

'Fools are content with their fates,' she snapped. 'Those with sense seek to control and even

change theirs.'

The Doctor was unmoved. 'Well then, you'll have to find another way. You will never, ever be

able to influence a Koturian transformation, be it Jonos or some other poor soul whose life you would have warped – and then eventually ended. You cannot love. You cannot be a part of it.'

'You're one to lecture,' she said, tossing her hair back. 'Please, Doctor. Tell me more about your

great experiences with love and sharing your inner feelings. For someone who always travels with

others, you still seem remarkably alone to me.'

His smile tightened. 'For you, we'll have to start with something more basic. Like empathy.'

Jonos nervously took a couple of steps towards the Rani and reached for her. 'We'll figure this out.

There must be some mistake. What he's saying … it's not true …'

He tried to touch her, but the Rani pushed him away. 'Oh, be quiet. I'm so tired of your simpering.

It's no wonder you've never been married. Being free of your prattle doesn't make up for the failure of one of my greatest endeavours – but it helps.'

Cries of shock and outrage followed. ‘Find some guards and seize her!’ exclaimed Evris. ‘She

must be punished for the sacrilege she’s attempted.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, holding up his hand as several men rushed forward. ‘Let her go. Let her go –

as long as she tells us where she’s keeping the victims that are still alive.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Jonos and Evris in unison.

The Rani put her hands on her hips and laughed. ‘Thank you, but I don’t need any bargain of yours

to get myself out of here, Doctor. As for where they are … Well, that’s one secret you’ll never know.

Good luck searching once I’m gone.’

‘How about a bargain of a different sort?’ asked the Doctor. He reached into his pocket and held

up the crystal storage device from the lab. ‘Won’t be much of a victory if you leave completely

empty-handed, will it?’

The Rani paled. ‘How did you get that?’ she demanded, holding out her hand. ‘Give it to me!’

The Doctor set the crystal on the ground, his foot hovering over it.

She froze. ‘Wait!’

‘These are such contradictory little gadgets, aren’t they?’ mused the Doctor. ‘They can hold

gargantuan amounts of data, but are so, so fragile. Such a shame.’

‘You wouldn’t dare. The results of all of my research are there! Destroy it, and it’s gone. All of it.’

For a few moments, she was all fury and outrage, and then … she faltered. ‘Please. Don’t destroy it.

I've put in so much work here. Don't make it all for nothing.'

The Doctor's eyes widened in mock surprise. 'My goodness. It appears I was wrong. You *are*

capable of feeling emotion. Admittedly, it's only for cold hard data purchased through the blood of

innocents, but, well, it's a start. Perhaps we'll make a starry-eyed romantic of you after all.'

'Doctor,' she growled.

All levity faded from him. 'The victims. Tell us where they are. Not in your TARDIS, surely?'

'That rabble? Of course not.' She fell silent, but as her eyes returned to the crystal under his foot I could see fear playing over her features. 'Fine. There's a derelict casino seven blocks from the house.

I have them taken there for experimen– examination. It's where my servants roost.'

The Doctor's foot still hovered above the crystal, but his eyes flicked to Evris. 'Send someone

there immediately. A medical team.' The Koturian man nodded to a couple of servants who scurried

away. 'And maybe a very large flyswatter.'

The Rani's gaze never left the Doctor. 'There. I told you what you wanted to know. Now prove

you're the alleged man of honour you play, and give me the crystal!'

'Gladly.' With hands as nimble as a magician's, the Doctor picked up the crystal and tossed it

towards the Rani who caught it with equal deftness. 'Now, Evris, it's all up to you.'

The guards Evris had summoned earlier began to advance. For a second, the Rani squeezed the

crystal, relief flooding her face. Then the haughty look that seemed to be her trademark returned. 'I don't think so.' She shot a glance to the

opposite corner of the room. ‘Stop them!’

The contingent of lizard-men who’d seized Wira and me surged forward and intercepted the

guards. In the clash and confusion, the Rani was momentarily forgotten, and I watched her slowly

back away from the fray, a triumphant smile on her face.

‘You might regret not helping me with this one day,’ she called over to us. ‘Your next regeneration

may be sooner than you think.’

‘Doctor –’ I began.

‘I see her.’

He started towards the Rani when suddenly she *disappeared* into one of the giant urns. That was soon followed by an all-too-familiar sound. The urn vanished.

‘It was her TARDIS.’

The Doctor nodded, his expression a mix of resignation and envy. ‘My kingdom for a chameleon

circuit.’ He sighed and then switched into jovial mode. ‘I’m guessing she had it standing by there to spirit Jonos off immediately for experimentation once he’d changed. Probably not the exciting

wedding night he’d had in mind.’

‘I can’t believe we were all so fooled,’ said Evris morosely.

He’d come to stand beside us, and I took a moment to survey the scene. People were on their feet,

anxious and confused, but there were no real injuries or damage. The Rani’s minions had been

subdued quickly, simply by sheer numbers – as she’d known they would be. I recalled what the

Doctor had said about them before, how they never had a fighting chance.

‘Don’t beat yourself up,’ the Doctor replied, patting his friend on the shoulder. ‘She’s a clever

woman – a *very* clever woman, which makes it all the more tragic that she uses that intellect with so little morality.’

‘Poor Jonos,’ said Evris. ‘Having his heart broken like that. How will he ever find love soon

enough for his Phasing?’

I glanced back up towards the Imori stone. An obviously miserable Jonos sat on the floor while

Wira knelt beside him, clasping his hands and doling out comforting words that I couldn’t quite make out.

‘Maybe he’ll find it in an unexpected place,’ I said.

Evris followed my gaze and frowned. ‘A serving-girl?’

The Doctor scoffed. ‘That’s your concern? Come now, you’re a civilised man. Let go of your silly

and archaic classist ideologies and try focusing on the fact that that nice girl cares about your son –

and isn’t an unscrupulous scientific mastermind.’

‘Compelling argument,’ Evris admitted. ‘Excuse me while I talk to my son.’

We watched him walk away, and I hoped Jonos and Wira might truly make things work in time. For

now, he was too devastated to even notice her presence, but surely someone deserved a happy ending

here. It was a cheering thought, but one that soon faded as I turned towards the Doctor.

‘You let her keep her data,’ I said. ‘Maybe she’ll try some new tactic with the Koturians.’

He smiled. ‘Not likely. I erased the crystal back in her lab.’

I gaped. ‘She was already pretty upset about her plans falling through

here. When she realises what

you did to the crystal, she's *really* not going to be happy with you.'

'She never is,' he said solemnly. He held out his arm, and I linked mine through it. 'Now then.

Since we're here, shall we go try our luck in the casino while the others sort this mess out?'

I laughed as we strolled out through the confused Koturian congregation. 'Luck? I thought you said

earlier that it was skill.'

'As long as you don't run out of it, it doesn't matter what you call it.'

'And you're not worried about that happening?' I asked.

'Not in the least, Peri. Not in the least.'

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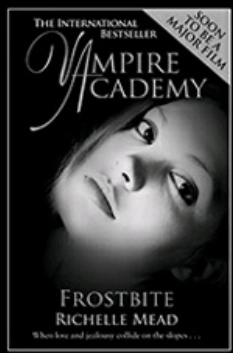

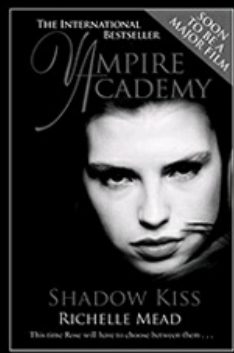

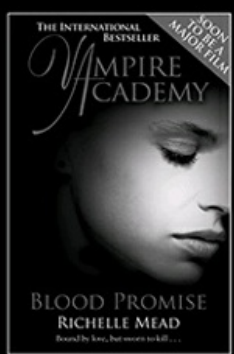

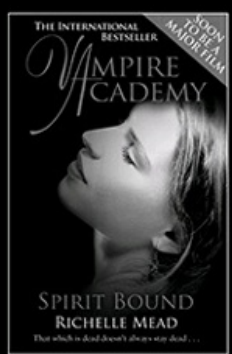

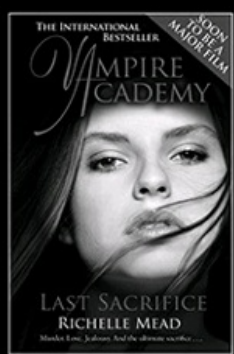

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